
Desert wild flowers

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How fascinating and mysterious are desert wild flowers as seen through the enchantment of April and May in Northern Arizona! Upon entering Arizona, after crossing the Colorado River, the color and beauty of its flora are bewilderingly wonderful and greatly enhanced by a setting amidst splendors of weirdly grotesque, strangely fantastic scenery. What a land of interesting discovery is revealed as the plant lover journeys into this first fifty miles of Arizona territory: from the glamorous Colorado River, through the grandly spectacular Black Ute Mountains, and down into the vastnesses of the Sacramento Valley.

There is nothing especially note-worthy about the fringe of Cottonwoods and Willows, Arrow-Weeds and Salt-bushes densely jungling the banks of the Colorado River. In close proximity, however, are many interesting plants. . . . The HONEY MESQUITE (*Prosopis juliflora*) is a small, straggling, thorny tree clothed in dark green foliage and slender spikes of honey-golden, fluffy, fragrant blossoms. Its flat bean-like fruits, ripening in fall, are favored essentials of Indian sustenance. . . . Showers of Gold! Surely such an expression must allude to Springtime blossoming of PALO VERDE (*Cercidium torreyanum*). Here is a large and spreading, spiny tree, frequently shattered by the elements. Though leafless most of the year, the Spanish Palo Verde is, nevertheless, the "Green Tree" of the desert, because its branches are always smooth and bright green. This *Cercidium* was named in honor of Dr. Torrey. . . . What might be lazy drifts of blue-green smoke, curling along the dry washes, eventually become clumps of DESERT SMOKE TREE (*Parosela spinosa*). This unique wilderness tree, like the Palo Verde, is leafless except for a few weeks in early Springtime. It is intricately and spinily branched and delights with flowers of deepest indigo-blue. . . . In marked contrast to its

background of jet black rocks, flourishes the pure white CHRISTMAS DESERT HOLLY, botanically named *Atriplex hymenelytra* by Dr. Torrey in 1857. Arising from a gnarled and woody base, this compact shrub is garbed heavily in silvery tomentose cordate leaves. . . . Surely the sands of the desert are always to be visualized as billowy, wind rippled dunes of shifting silvery brightness, with here and there patches of lovely pink SAND VERBENA (*Abronia villosa*) and blushing white EVENING PRIMROSE (*Oenothera trichocalyx*).

From the sanguinary Colorado River, the road meanders into the spectacular Black Ute Mountains where, in Spring-time, the rocky hillsides and the sandy valleys are re-created as veritable desert flower gardens.

THE OCOTILLO (*Fouquieria splendens*) is the most magnificent of desert trees. From a knotty root-crown spring long, unbranched, very thorny stems which, in late Spring, are covered with rosettes of leafy greenery and surmounted by dense panicles of brilliant scarlet flowers. The Ocotillo, contrary to popular opinion, is not a Cactus. . . . A small and straggling deciduous tree, armed with sharp curved prickles, is the CATCLAW (*Acacia gregii*). In Summer the Catclaw is habited in feathery compound leaves and adorned with short cylindrical spikes of fluffy yellow, fragrant blossoms. Its flat, cinnamon-red seedpods resemble miniature frying pans. . . . The Catclaw is host plant for the MESQUITE MISTLETOE (*Phoradendron californicum*). The large reddish bronze bundles of this leafless parasite gather in the branches of many desert trees and there are frequently mistaken for gigantic birds' nests. In late Autumn the Mesquite Mistletoe glows with beauty of small, globose, pinkish and viscid berries. . . . However, at the mere thought of parasites, there flashes a vision of that loveliest plant robber of them all, the DODDER (*Cuscuta denticulata*), painting the desert landscape with golden luminance. . . . It is delightful to discover in this region some plants of the uniquely interesting Cactus family. That tall and widely spreading Cactus with its slenderly cylindrical and densely spiny branches terminating in yellowish green blossoms is the DEERHORN CACTUS (*Opuntia echinocarpa*). The BEAVER TAIL CACTUS (*Opuntia basilaris*) is the low-growing spineless Cactus, with flat blue-green slab-like "leaves" closely dotted with golden

brown and crowded along their upper edges with glorious cups of rosy carmine. Easily recognized by the excessively long spines of its flat joints is the GRIZZLY BEAR CACTUS (*Opuntia erinacea*). This Cactus is particularly interesting as its flowers may be either bright pink or soft yellow on different plants. . . . In this world of picturesque grandeur are many beautiful annual plants. The pure white PINCUSHION FLOWER (*Chaenactis douglasii*), the white, flushed pink RAFINESQUIA (*Rafinesquia neomexicana*), and the clear canary yellow SNAKE'S HEAD (*Malacothrix coulteri*) are here; so too, are both the pale blue and the dark purple WILD HELIOTROPES (*Phacelia tanacetifolia* and *Phacelia crenulata*). And LUPINES! Hosts of them in all shades of colorful tintings from pure white to deepest royal purple.

The picturesque gold mining town of Oatman is passed ere the summit of the mountain is reached where a marked change in vegetation is to be noted.

A real tree and the only "Evergreen" of the region is the DESERT JUNIPER (*Juniperus utahensis*). A thing of rugged beauty, symmetrical of habit, and mantled in light green foliage, very profusely begemmed with luminance of silvery berries. This Juniper, locally known as Cedar, is a prevailing tree of desert mountains and usually found in close association with the more famous Pinyon Pine. . . . Bold clumps of stiffly curved leaves resembling the pampas grass of gardens are to be recognized as BEAR GRASS (*Nolina bigelovii*). As the season advances, long straw-colored flower stalks bear congested compound panicles of thousands of tiny, creamy white liliaceous blossoms above the dark green foliage. . . . GOLDEN STENOTOPSIS (*Stenotopsis linearifolius*) is a straggling, sticky shrub common enough on desert mountain slopes. The narrow, fascicled leaves, strongly odoriferous of balsam, grow on fastigate branches which, forming a flat top, are surmounted by bright yellow, raggedly-rayed composite flowers. . . . Vividly contrasting with the somber blackness of its setting is the pure white INCIENSO (*Encelia farinosa*). From its woody trunk spring many short branches bearing terminal whorls of silver white leaves and loose cymes of golden yellow blossoms. . . . The most delightful of all desert plants is the DESERT LILY (*Hesperocallis undulata*). This Easter Lily of the wilds sends up,

from between long wavy leaves, a rather fleshy stalk bearing from four to twelve large pure white flowers, all delicately marked with green pencillings. This most capricious of Nature's children is oddly endowed with a faculty for remaining dormant through periods of dry years awaiting the more favorable growing conditions when there is a rainy season on the desert. . . . Many flowering plants grow scatteringly over these desert mountains. The ARIZONA VERBENA (*Verbena wrightii*), dainty in pale lavender-blue and the GOLDEN POPPY (*Eschscholtzia douglasii*), just as exquisite as the larger and more brilliant California Poppy, are there inviting admiration; from the shelter of low desert shrubs leap flaming scarlet tongues of the INDIAN PAINT BRUSH (*Castilleia angustifolia*); and clumps of lavender-purple DESERT ASTER (*Aster tortifolius*) contrast delightfully with those of bright golden yellow DESERT SUNFLOWER (*Geraea canescens*).

Next the scene of floral enchantment is the vast Sacramento Valley. The Black Ute Mountains are behind; and, across a distance of extensive valleyland, loom the towering peaks of the Hualapai Mountain Range.

The SPANISH DAGGER (*Yucca mohavensis*) is the outstanding tree of this immense sandy and rocky valleyland. It is easily recognized by a black, shaggy massive trunk that reaches, either branched or unbranched a height of some ten feet or more. The yellowish green leaves are borne in a terminal rosette and from their midst, in season, arise stubby panicles of fetid, greenish white flowers. . . . Another *Yucca* is the SPANISH BAYONET (*Yucca baccata*). This is an acaulescent species with basal rosettes of upturned bluish-green leaves and bears the largest flowers of the genus. These showy flowers are creamy white, flushed with bronze-red, and are followed by large conical, edible fruits. . . . A leafless tree, with short black trunk and upright bright green, spine-tipped branches, was named, both as to genus and species, *Canotia holacantha*, by Dr. Torrey. Its local name is PALO CHRISTI. The Palo Christi has inconspicuous white flowers and usually bears many woody, black, long beaked seedpods from previous seasons. . . . A graceful plant with black annulated branches crowded with a wealth of shining bright green leaves, a riot of golden yellow blossoms, and silver velvety seed vessels is the CREOSOTE BUSH (*Larrea*

tridentata glutinosa). It is the most prevalent large desert shrub and very charming despite its being coated with a sticky, evil-smelling, resinous exudation from which comes its common name of Creosote Bush. . . . A shrub valued by all desert dwellers is the MORMON TEA (*Ephedra viridis*). Equisetum-like in appearance, the Mormon Tea has slender, jointed stems with leaves reduced to rudimentary scales. Staminate and pistillate flowers are borne on different plants and, in spring-time, the male-flowered shrub becomes a glory of golden-stamened catkins. A tea made from an infusion of the branches is regarded by Indians and Whites alike as a sovereign remedy in the treatment of disease. . . . Among the beautiful flowering plants of the Sacramento Valley are such perennials as the SALMON GLOBE MALLOW (*Sphaeralcea pedata*), a compact silvery bush with dozens of long spikes flaunting hollyhock-like blossoms of from salmon-pink to terra-cotta; The CREEK SENECEO (*Senecio douglasi*), a charming plant of wide distribution with much divided leaves and an inflorescence of bright yellow blossoms; and the DESERT MARIGOLD (*Baileya multiradiata*) with basal tufts of hoary silver foliage and long-peduncled, semi-double flowers of deepest golden yellow. . . .

Cactuses of varying forms frequent this great desert plain. The CHOLLA CACTUS (*Opuntia bigelovii*) is strikingly apparent on hillside slopes with its single straight black trunk bearing many short and porrect branches, aglow with glistening spiny armament. The inconspicuous flowers are greenish. The BARREL CACTUS (*Ferocactus lecontei*) is a stout and massive barrel intricately protected by broad annulated curved spines, pink and yellow in color. The bright golden blossoms and red-rosy fruits are borne in a nest-like arrangement on top of the plant. The HEDGEHOG CACTUS (*Echinocereus engelmannii*) is a most abundant desert succulent and is everywhere easily distinguished by its cucumbersque stems, all cruelly armed with varicolored spines and its great open chalices of rose-purple loveliness filled with golden stamens, over which, like a tiny butterfly, hovers the pale green stigma. . . . One of the strangest of all desert plants is the DESERT TRUMPET (*Eriogonum inflatum*). From a basal rosette of round, crinkled leaves, the leafless stems arise to repeatedly branch and re-branch. Just below the point of branching these slender stems

become very much swollen. Indian folklore proclaiming its swollen stems to be resting places of young rattlesnakes. However, the less romantic white desert dweller disproves this legend in most practical fashion by adding the young and tender shoots of the desert trumpet to the contents of his salad bowl. . . . The fame of Dr. Torrey is well established in the wilderness and many are the desert plants either named by him or in his honor. In this regard the Desert Trumpet is especially noteworthy, inasmuch as it was botanically named *Eriogonum inflatum* by Dr. Torrey in collaboration with General Fremont. This is of interesting importance because the botany of the Southwest owes an outstanding debt to these two great men: the one an eminent botanist, the other an indefatigable plant collector.

KINGMAN, ARIZONA